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A man for all seasons;

Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers, by Daniel Ellsberg, Viking: 498 pp., \$29.95

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BODY:

The publication of Daniel Ellsberg's memoir, "Secrets," at this particular moment is undoubtedly coincidental, but there is an eerie timeliness about it. Rumors of war abound, this time perhaps for a unilateral preemptive full-scale attack unprecedented in American history. Decisions are being made on the basis of secret information that will be divulged, in Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld's words, "only if and when the president decides that he thinks it's appropriate." It is this arrogance and secretiveness that are at the heart of the events in Ellsberg's book and that, he believes, pose a grave threat to the democratic process.

"Isn't it after all only history? Does it really matter?" With these dismissive words, Ellsberg recalls, Sen. J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.) in 1970 refused to make public the Pentagon Papers, the top-secret internal history of America's early involvement in Vietnam commissioned by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara in 1967. It was only history, perhaps, but it was this history that finally persuaded an already deeply skeptical Ellsberg that the war in Vietnam had no basis in legitimacy and that led him to do something he believed would land him in jail. He purloined the report from the Rand Corp. in Santa Monica, where he worked, and released it to the New York Times, an action that caused a furor in the country and in the White House and set into motion events that led to Watergate, the fall of Richard Nixon's presidency and the end of the Vietnam War.

The story has been told before, most recently in Tom Wells' gossipy and critical biography, "Wild Man: The Life and Times of Daniel Ellsberg," but "Secrets" gives Ellsberg's version of these dramatic events. It provides a personal account of his conversion from gung-ho Marine and Cold War defense intellectual and bureaucrat to antiwar zealot prepared to go to prison to stop a war he had come to despise. The book also offers a valuable glimpse into the workings of the national security bureaucracy in the heyday of the Cold War and a searching analysis of the government secrecy that helped sustain it.

Ellsberg's connections to the war in Vietnam are quite remarkable. He first traveled there in 1961 and claims that during the visit he began to doubt that the United States could achieve its goals. His first day at the Pentagon as a lower-level official was Aug. 4, 1964, the day of the second alleged attack on U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, which, although it surely did not take place, led to the first U.S. bombing of North Vietnam. During 1964-65, the period of then-President Johnson's stealthy movement toward full-scale war, Ellsberg worked closely at the Pentagon on Vietnam issues with John McNaughton, McNamara's top assistant. In that capacity, he even presented the government's position at several campus teach-ins. He then worked in Vietnam for two years at the "rice-roots level" with the legendary counterinsurgency experts Edward Lansdale and John Paul Vann.

After returning to the United States, he was part of the team that wrote the Pentagon Papers. In March 1968, he joined the task force--headed by McNamara's successor, Clark Clifford--that reevaluated U.S. policy after the Tet Offensive. He later helped draft National Security Study Memorandum 1, a survey of past policies and future options designed to shape the Nixon administration's policies toward the war.

In an era rife with controversy, Ellsberg is one of the most controversial figures, hero to some, traitor to others. Brilliant and

charming, he never achieved what some had expected of him. Intense, zealous and flamboyant, he admits to becoming "obsessed" with Vietnam -- hardly unique to him in those days -- and having been under a psychiatrist's care.

What he seeks to show in "Secrets" is that his conversion from hawk to dove was an entirely rational response to specific events. In August 1964 and afterward, he saw the way the Johnson administration, and especially the president, played fast and loose with the truth. As a civilian in the Viet Cong-dominated Mekong Delta, he remained committed to the war and the Lansdale-Vann approach to it, but he increasingly questioned the practicality and the morality of the way it was fought. The Tet Offensive confirmed to him, and to others, its hopelessness.

But it was his work on the Pentagon Papers that finally convinced him the war was wrong, not just unwinnable. His research led him to question the then-fashionable theory that overly optimistic advisors had led unwary presidents into a quagmire. What he found instead was that presidents had repeatedly escalated the American commitment, despite uniformly pessimistic estimates from their advisors, and had repeatedly lied to the public about what they were doing and the results achieved.

His subsequent reading of the entire Pentagon Papers, especially accounts of the early years of American involvement, convinced him that the United States had been on the wrong side of history in opposing Vietnamese nationalism: The war had been a "war of foreign aggression, American aggression." About the same time, he became involved with the antiwar movement and embraced the principles of civil disobedience.

The leak on March 10, 1968, of the military's post-Tet request for 206,000 additional soldiers, which he insists was not his doing, "suddenly opened my eyes to my responsibility as a citizen," he claims, convincing him that releasing classified material might be the only way to combat the secrecy system and the "lying machine" and discredit and perhaps stop the war.

The last third of the book deals with Ellsberg's leaking of the papers and the response. The outlines of this story are known, but he provides interesting detail about secreting the papers from the Rand safes, working for weeks to make copies, trying to persuade key senators and congressmen to make them public and eventually releasing them to an old acquaintance also "obsessed" with Vietnam, Neil Sheehan of the New York Times. The Times decided to publish them without telling him, and when he learned of the decision, he fled briefly into the antiwar underground before his arrest.

The rest of the story is rich with irony. Had Nixon ignored the papers or even exploited them politically because they dealt primarily with his Democratic predecessors, their effect might have been minimal. But Nixon chose instead to try to stop their publication -- the first such effort to muzzle the press since the American Revolution -- and to discredit Ellsberg and deter other leakers through the illegal actions of a group of petty operatives known as the Watergate Plumbers. The results, of course, were the Watergate scandal and Nixon's resignation. And the plumbers' burglarizing of Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office and the administration's clumsy intrusion into the judicial process resulted in the court throwing out Ellsberg's case. There is substantial evidence that Nixon planned to continue the war after the January 1973 "peace" agreement, and it is entirely possible that the Pentagon Papers accomplished what Ellsberg set out to do: end the war.

"Secrets" also offers a scathing critique of the system of secrecy that Ellsberg worked in and eventually challenged. This system came into being in World War II, became entrenched during the Cold War and resisted post-Cold War challenges, even to declassify decades-old documents. It is still alive and doing well in the George W. Bush White House, considered by many the most secretive administration since that of Nixon.

In Ellsberg's words, it is an "apparatus of secrecy, built on effective procedures, practices and career incentives, that permitted a president to arrive at and execute a secret foreign policy to a degree that went far beyond what even relatively informed outsiders, including journalists and members of Congress, could imagine." Few would deny that some information must be withheld, but Ellsberg insists that classified material far exceeds the essential demands of national security and that it is being used by top officials to cover their mistakes. It is "paternalistic to the point of being undemocratic," he writes; officials keep the press, the public and Congress in the dark and then use that ignorance to ignore them.

Daniel Ellsberg is a complex individual, and the reasons for his conversion from hawk to dove and his release of the Pentagon Papers, as Wells argues in his "Wild Man," may be more complicated than he acknowledges. In "Secrets," his attack on the secrecy system is painted in black and white rather than in shades of gray, and he offers no thoughts on alternatives or how better to balance legitimate national security needs with the public's right to know. The book concludes abruptly with the end of his trial. Some may be tempted to dismiss his arguments. So much has changed since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and Ellsberg's past may raise questions about his reliability, but skeptics should put aside their doubts and read the book.

"Secrets" is an often gripping account by a controversial figure of a tumultuous era that still troubles and divides us. It underscores the need to understand history in areas of the world whose destinies we presume to shape. It provides important insights into the national security bureaucracy that produced the Vietnam War, the system that helped sustain it and the ethos and code of loyalty among officials that held it together. If we're looking for a warning signal as we teeter on the brink of yet another war waged on the basis of information considered too important to share with the public, we should

look no further than these pages. ❧